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James S. Cummins

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The Philippines Glimpsed in the First Latin-American "Novel"

JAMES S. CUMMINS

In his splendid study of the Jesuits in the Philippines Father Horacio de la Costa described the 1680s as "one of the most eventful decades" in the history of the islands.¹ And so it was: those years witnessed an earthquake, a Chinese rising in the Parian, martyrdoms in the Jesuits' mission in the Marianas,² the murder by pirates of friars working in Cagayan and Ilocos, the holdup in 1686 of the galleon bound for Acapulco; while for fear of corsairs, the *San Telmo*, arriving from Mexico, had to be met by a hastily converted ship of war armed with 100 cannon and 1000 men and escorted into Cavite.³ And, if this was not enough, throughout the decade there raged a violent controversy between the Archbishop, Felipe Pardo, O.P., and the civic authorities. Though high hopes had been entertained of the abilities of the new Governor, Gabriel de Curuzeláegui (1684-89), who was described as being "impartial," and who did indeed do much to cool tempers, the crown officers in general failed to please everyone. Father Antonio Jaramillo, for instance, writing in 1689 to the Duchess of Aveiro, the celebrated "Mother of the Missions," exclaimed that "if the Gate of Heaven is narrow for us all, for those in government office in Manila it is narrower still, indeed, it is a door through which minds so dressed in passion cannot pass."⁴

1. H. de la Costa, S. J., *The Jesuits in the Philippines, 1581-1768* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1961) p. 502; and he writes of the "astounding events" taking place in those days (ibid, p. 500).

2. For the Marianas mission see W. Barrett, *Mission in the Marianas: Luis Sanvitores and Companions, 1669-70* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1975); and the review by F. Zubillaga, "América e Islas Marianas," *Archivum Historicum Societatis Jesu* 46 (January-June 1977): 254.

3. E. H. Blair and J. A. Robertson, eds., *The Philippine Islands, 1493-1898* (Cleveland, Ohio; 1903-1909), 47:74; W.L. Schurz, *The Manila Galleon* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1959), p. 214.

4. For the Duchess of Aveiro see C. R. Boxer, "The Mother of the Missions," *History Today* 23, 10 (October 1973): 733-39.

The community as a whole, then, had its trials, and so too did individuals. One in particular, Alonso Ramírez, whose life is of considerable interest, had arrived in Manila in 1682. Ramírez, a Puerto Rican, had left his birthplace in order to make his fortune in Mexico, but having failed there (despite a bid to "better himself" by means of a judicious marriage), he had decided to go to the Philippines. After many misadventures during the next few years, he eventually returned to Mexico, where he related his life story, a story which is in part a primitive picaresque novella and in part a typical "captivity narrative." The Viceroy, the Conde de Galve (1688-96), was sufficiently intrigued to instruct Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora to record Ramírez's "painful pilgrimage." The result of this collaboration between scholar and pícaro-captive was the *Infortunios de Alonso Ramirez* (Mexico City, 1690), one of the best known of Sigüenza y Góngora's works. A recital of adventures and mishaps, it is variously regarded as the forerunner of the Mexican novel, or as a biography with novelesque overtones, or as the first step towards periodical literature in the New World, since it relates events which were too recent in time for it to be described as a chronicle.

The choice of recorder was as obvious as it was suitable. Don Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700) was one of the two leading savants of the day. The male counterpart of the extraordinary blue-stockung nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, his range and versatility, and the catalogue of his qualifications and accomplishments, tax one's credulity. A secular priest, he was chaplain to the Hospital del Amor de Dios in Mexico City and almoner to the Archbishop. He was an astronomer, professor of mathematics and university accountant, an expert on military fortifications and official examiner of gunners, cosmographer royal and map-maker. A philosopher and theologian, he also served as assessor to the Inquisition. He even showed himself to be something of a hero in the notorious Indian uprising of 1692. A scientist to the end, he left his body to the medical faculty for dissection, and his library to the Jesuit college of Sts. Peter and Paul, where he knew it would be best appreciated. Sigüenza y Góngora as an encyclopaedic scholar can be compared with his contemporary in Peru, Pedro de Peralta Barnuevo (1663-1743). But his interests and contacts were not limited to the New World, for he corresponded with such celebrated men as the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher (1601-

1690), the learned Cistercian Bishop Juan de Caramuel (1606-1682), and with Newton's collaborator, the first Astronomer Royal of England, John Flamsteed (1646-1719).

A prolific writer in many fields, Sigüenza y Góngora, the nephew of the famous Spanish baroque poet Luis de Góngora, produced some verse himself, though none of it is very distinguished. When he turned to the recording of Ramírez's story, Sigüenza y Góngora chose a simple, direct, first-person form of narrative without any of the solemnity or verbosity which might have been expected of the writer and of his age. The *Infortunios* reflects his own personal interests too, for it incorporates much geographical, navigational, and cosmographical information. It is sadly revealing to find one or two Hispanic critics dismissing this aspect of the work as tedious. By contrast, and significantly, information of just this kind was warmly welcomed by British readers of books such as the contemporary William Dampier's *Voyages*. For Sigüenza y Góngora was not simply indulging his own personal hobby, but was acting in accordance with a deep-seated desire to educate and to stimulate general interest. Of obvious importance, too, is the opinion of Sigüenza y Góngora, the expert on military matters, who in the third chapter shows the reader the sorry state of the defences of the Philippines — even under the care of the zealous Governor Curuzeláegui. This point was noted by Marcelino Menéndez y Pelayo, the perceptive nineteenth-century critic, who saw here the "same old story": Spaniards ever unready; enemy ever prepared.

The *Infortunios de Alonso Ramírez* is divided into seven chapters. The first of these relates his early life: he was born (1662) in San Juan de Puerto Rico of an Andalusian carpenter, Lucas de Villanueva, and a local woman, Ana Ramírez.⁵ Dissatisfied with his prospects, he left home at the age of thirteen and went as a ship's boy to Havana, and to Vera Cruz in Mexico where he

5. It will be noted that Ramírez chose to be known by his mother's surname, but among Spaniards of the period this "indiferencia de apellidos" was not uncommon. For instance, Lewis Hanke, discussing the names of Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela, the historian of Potosí, finds what he calls "una exuberancia tropical," for Arzáns himself used five different surnames and his biographers have increased this by adding seven more variants of their own making. See B. Arzáns de Orsúa y Vela, *Historia de la Villa imperial de Potosí*, ed. L. Hanke and G. Mendoza (Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press, 1965), 1:xxxiii.

deserted in order to go to Puebla de los Angeles. After six months there, during which he "suffered greater hunger than at home," he went, cursing himself for ever having left Puerto Rico, to Mexico City. There he worked for a year under a master-builder, but again hope lured him away, this time to Oaxaca, only to meet fresh disappointment. Now a vagabond, he travelled around New Spain and Guatemala, earning a meagre living by bartering with Indians, always trusting that "something would turn up." Eventually something did, for he married the orphaned niece of the Dean of Mexico City Cathedral, Juan de Poblete, who had earlier refused the Archbishopric of Manila.

This secure interlude was brief, for within a year his wife had died in childbirth. The unhappy Ramírez, "accused and convicted of uselessness by my own conscience, sentenced myself to the usual Mexican punishment for this crime: I exiled myself to the Philippines."⁶ In 1682 he left Acapulco on board the *Santa Rosa*, commanded by Antonio Nieto and with Leandro Cuello as pilot. This move ended the picaresque period in his story: the meandering in search of food and fortune; the rapid changing of employers and patrons; the marriage designed (in part at least) to better his lot; and, on one occasion reminiscent of the pícaro-squire episode in the *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the sad realization that he had adopted a master who was himself in need: "if the master has scarcely anything for himself, how then is the boy to get by?"

Chapter two describes the route to Manila. Though Ramírez does not delay over it, the vessel stopped, in accordance with policy and practice, at Guam in the Marianas. A Jesuit mission had recently (1668) been established there, and this, considered as an extension of the Philippines, was of considerable emotional significance to the Jesuits, since they felt that it brought them near,

6. There were frequent complaints that the less worthy tended to be sent, or to find their way, to the Philippines; see De la Costa, *op. cit.*, pp. 195, 221, 416; Blair and Robertson, *op. cit.*, 42:203; Hanke-Arzáns, *op. cit.*, 2:250; W.E. Retana, ed., *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas por el Dr. Antonio de Morga* (Madrid: Victoriano Suárez, 1909), pp. 425, 435; A. Rodríguez-Moñino, *Catálogo de Memoriales presentados al Consejo de Indias, 1626-30* (Madrid, 1953), p. 117; and the lengthy footnote by Retana in *Revue Hispanique* 54(1922):503-4. But the accusation was not limited to the Spanish-Americans: it was also alleged against the English that they transported certain types to their colonies; and there was even a classical precedent: "The Roman state discharged not only its ungovernable distressed multitude, but also its emeriti, its soldiers, which had served long and well in war, into colonies upon the frontiers of their empire. It was by this policy that they elbowed all the nations round them." Quoted in D.J. Boorstin, *The Americans I* (Harmondsworth, England: Pelican Books, 1965), p. 96.

once again, to their specially beloved Japan mission, now closed by imperial decree. The Philippines contributed much to this new establishment both in goods and personnel. In the early 1680s, for instance, "a Pampangan of noble birth and saintly character," Felipe Sonson, had been martyred there while serving as a Jesuit lay brother. Unfortunately, others too saw the Marianas as a link with the Philippines, and Guam was frequently visited by pirates and privateers who tried to appear respectable for the occasion. Some only called to take on fresh supplies, and hungry buccaneers began to call Guam the "Place of Plenty." An equally strong reason for these unsolicited visits was to seek information about the movement of local shipping and to sound out the possibility of an attack on Manila, and on the Galleon.

The new Governor Curuzeláegui (a former admiral) was soon reporting to Madrid that all the surrounding seas were infested with pirates. In 1686, for instance, as the *Santo Niño* was preparing to return to Acapulco, it was reported that no less than eleven hostile ships were ranging around the islands in search of her. In face of this situation, the Governor took vigorous steps to equip ships so as to make them capable of counterattack.⁷ Nevertheless English privateers continued to pay suspiciously friendly visits to Guam. Among them were William Cowley (1685), who pretended to be French,⁸ and, in 1686, the celebrated William Dampier who called there partly to refuel but chiefly as part of his plan to capture the Galleon. In the end he was forced, regretfully, to abandon his "Golden Projects." A Jesuit missionary who visited Dampier's ship during its stay in Guam was held hostage for some days but was graciously treated; indeed Dampier and the Captain, Swan, seem to have confided their troubles to the Father, and when they eventually released him they gave him a number of presents, including a telescope, clock, and astrolabe.⁹

7. Blair and Robertson, op. cit., 42:245; Juan Francisco de San Antonio, *Chronicle*, Book I; translated by P. Picornell (Manila, 1977), p. 248.

8. The Governor of Guam sent out three letters to Cowley (one in Spanish, one in Dutch, one in French) asking the privateers to identify themselves; he also borrowed some gunpowder from them to enable him to suppress a local rising. See R. Kerr, ed., *A General Collection of Voyages and Travels* (Edinburgh, 1814), 10:230-33.

9. For Dampier in the Philippines and Guam see William Dampier, *A New Voyage Round the World* (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), pp. 193-264. Dampier was disappointed in this attempt to capture the Manila Galleon, but later he was more successful, and there is a curious link here with Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In 1684 Dampier had found a Mosquito Indian known as "Will," who had been abandoned on the island of Juan Fer-

Ramírez, however, on this occasion at least, was spared all such alarms, and he reached Manila safely. After some reflection and soul-searching, he decided to cease his picaresque wanderings and to settle down. He decided the life of a sailor based in Manila would offer him a fair living and security enough. To put it in his own words:

During the voyage to Manila I came to realise that I should never rise above my station, although it hurt me to see that others, with fewer qualities, were able to improve their lot. So I put out of my mind all the fantasies about the future which I had now been entertaining for some years, for in the Philippine Islands I found abundance of all things, and especially in Manila where there is plenty in the extreme. Whatever a man wants in the way of food or clothing is available there at a moderate price. This is due to the diligence of the local Chinese and their desire to get rich. They trade in the place outside the city walls which is called the Parian where, with the permission of the Spaniards, they have settled down to live.

The beauty of the city, its strong defences, the amenity of its river and pleasure gardens, and its other attractions, make Manila famous among all the colonial settlements that the Europeans have established throughout the East. In a word, all conspires to render the inhabitants' lives happy and agreeable.

Most of the trading and transportation there is by and large carried on by sea, between the islands, so that there is a constant coming and going of shipping from one place to another. Accordingly, I decided to become a seaman, and I therefore settled down in Cavite. In this way I managed to devote myself to trading in such a way as to make a profit, and I forecast a comfortable living for myself in the future. At the same time, of course, I was able to visit different cities and ports all over Asia on my various voyages.

So, agreeable though he found life in Manila and in Cavite, Ramírez also ventured as far afield as Madras, "where the Apostle St Thomas is buried." San Tomé, after the recent struggles between the French and Dutch, he describes as "now a heap of ruins."

nandez; later on, Will was to become the model for Defoe's man "Friday." On a still later voyage, in 1709, on the same island Dampier discovered Alexander Selkirk, the original of "Robinson Crusoe." Then, the following year, cruising off the Californian coast, Dampier and his men captured the Manila Galleon, *Encarnación*, bound for Acapulco; she was renamed the *Batchelor* and Selkirk-Crusoe was put on board her as her first mate. Impudently, the privateers then took her back to Guam where they entertained the governor, Juan Antonio Pimentel, on board; then after taking on supplies, they returned to England. This was not Crusoe's only connection with those waters: Defoe took him back there in the *Farther Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* of 1719. See Dampier, op. cit., pp. 65-67; Woodes Rogers, *A Cruising Voyage around the World*, (London; Bell and Lintot, 1712).

He also visited Malacca, "the key to all the Orient and its rich markets";¹⁰ Macao, he noted, "though occupied by the Portuguese, is yet subject to all the frauds and swindles of the Tartars who dominate in China." Batavia clearly impressed him; he noted its excellent fortifications and the shipping there: "If I say that the whole universe is found condensed there, then I have said it all."

But these pleasant years of prosperity and travel ended abruptly when Ramírez fell foul of English pirates. He tells the story himself:

More from self-interest than from pleasure I continued with my chosen work. Sometimes I had to act under orders, fulfilling a superior's instructions. One such occasion caused me to fall victim to those misfortunes which even today dog my steps. My trials began like this: in the fort of Cavite, we were in need of provisions, and in order to meet this demand Governor Curuzeláegui decided to despatch a single-decked frigate to the province of Ilocos to bring down what was required, as had been done on other occasions. I was put in charge of the vessel and of her crew of twenty-five seamen. For our defence on this voyage we were furnished with four pikes and two muskets which were produced from the royal arsenal. However the muskets needed a supply of lighted brands in order to ignite them, since each had its flint-lock hammer broken. They also gave me two fists' full of bullets and five pounds of powder.

Equipped with this supply of arms and munitions, but without any artillery or even a *paterero* (i.e., a small gun for shooting stones) although we had gunports for six pieces, I set sail. We took six days to reach Ilocos, we spent nine or ten more there buying and then loading the supplies on board. On the fifth day of our return journey, plying to windward, we reached the mouth of Mariveles and prepared to enter the port. Then, round about four o'clock in the afternoon we saw two vessels near to the land. I, and indeed all of us, presumed that they were the two that had been sent under Captains Juan Bautista and Juan Carvallo to Pangasinan and Panay respectively, to bring rice and other necessities to the fortress of Cavite and to the surrounding area. So although I lay to leeward, I continued on the same tack without any misgivings whatsoever, for there seemed no reason to be suspicious.

Accordingly, I was alarmed when shortly afterwards I saw two canoes rowing towards us at top speed, and my alarm became intense when, on their approach, I discerned that they were hostile. We stood to the defensive — as far as our four pikes and two muskets permitted!

10. Cf. the saying of Tomé Pires, "Whoever is lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice."

— while the enemy rained bullets upon us, though without, as yet, actually boarding our vessel. From time to time we replied with our two muskets, one man levelling and aiming his weapon while another fired it with a live ember. And meantime we cut our supply of bullets into two with a knife so as to double our store of munitions, thus prolonging our ludicrous attempts at defense.

The two large ships (from which the canoes had come) descended upon us almost immediately; we lowered our topsails, crying for quarter; over fifty Englishmen waving swords rushed on board us — and all this happened in the twinkling of an eye.

The enemy seized the rear quarter-deck cabin, driving us back with blows to the poop. Then they fell to roaring with mocking laughter at the sight of our supply of arms and munitions; and they laughed even more when they learnt that it was a *royal* frigate that they had taken, and that our stock of arms had been supplied by the king's arsenal.

It was then six o'clock in the evening, on Tuesday, 4th March, 1687.

The horror of the event is emphasised by the precise manner in which Ramírez records it; it reads like an entry in a diary.

Curiously enough, Ramírez almost fell into the hands of the privateer William Dampier, who by then had been cruising around Manila Bay for the previous two weeks, and on the very day of his capture Dampier had also taken two prizes in the same area. Had Ramírez been taken by Dampier we should have found his story in the latter's *Voyages* and not in the works of Sigüenza y Góngora.¹¹

To return to the text: chapter three relates Ramírez's life as a prisoner of the corsairs, who have still not been precisely identified. Life with them was to be a painful odyssey: the pirates left from Manila with their booty, travelling restlessly across the Indian Ocean from Bengal to Australia, murdering, raping, robbing, burning, looting, and capturing ships; among others, two richly laden ambassadorial ships. One of these was bearing precious

11. Some of these details are confirmed for us by an anonymous Jesuit's diary of events from June 1686-June 1687: "4th March [1687]. . . the English pirate captured a sloop of the kings' . . . coming from Pangasinan laden with 3,000 cabans of cleaned rice. *Item*, he also captured a champan belonging to the alcalde of Pangasinan which came laden with rice and other products (Blair and Robertson, op. cit., 39:11, 137). These must have been the vessels commanded by Captains Bautista and Carvallo in Ramírez's story; the "English pirate" would have been Captain Swan's *Cygnat*, with Dampier on board. And the latter relates that on "23rd February" (that is, 4th March, as given by Ramírez and the Anonymous Jesuit, who were of course reckoning by the Gregorian Calendar, still not acknowledged in Protestant England), when "within eight leagues of Manila," they captured two vessels from Pangasinan, one laden with rice, and the other commanded by the "Boatswain of the *Acapulco* Ship [*San Telmo*] which escaped us at *Guam*," (Dampier, op. cit., p. 260).

stones and other costly presents from Goa to Bangkok, and the other was carrying a mission from the Siamese king to the Governor of Manila. And a third prize had on board a large cargo of silk from Macao bound for Europe via Goa.¹²

Eventually, after some two years of this life, the pirates reached Madagascar where, after a conference amongst themselves, they proposed to return home to England. There was some debate as to whether they should kill their prisoners or not, and in the end it was decided to let the unfortunates loose in a small boat and to leave them to fend for themselves.

Chapter four is largely taken up with a retrospective view of the story, in which Ramírez outlines the trials and punishments he and the other prisoners suffered at the hands of their captors. Obviously, he was free when he dictated his book and this belated expression of his criticisms of the corsairs, and his catalogue of their atrocities, suggests that a subconscious fear inhibited him until he was safely beyond their reach, not only in reality but even within the confines of the story itself.

The remaining three chapters of the book relate his misadventures. Eventually, "through the intercession of our Lady of Guadalupe," he and his companions reached Trinidad. They sailed on to Yucatán, where their little vessel was wrecked, and in the manner of Robinson Crusoe, Ramírez had to swim back from the deserted beach to rescue provisions and equipment still aboard the sinking hulk. Then, after still more adventures, Ramírez made his way into Mexico City where he met the Viceroy and, through his interest, Sigüenza y Góngora. The latter, obviously filled with compassion for him, was instrumental in helping him in many ways, finally assisting him to settle down in Vera Cruz. And there, in 1690, with the publication of his biography, Alonso Ramírez vanishes, and his name, apart from the chronicle of his captivity, is not recorded anywhere. If he did ever manage to return to Manila he left no great mark there either; and no mention of him is to be found even in the hospitable pages of Blair and Robertson's fifty-five volumes of Philippine history. But one can easily see him in his later years, proudly showing off his copy of the *Infortunios* written for him by the greatest scholar of the day, reminiscing over his days

12. It is amusing to note that earlier Cowley's men had refused to lower themselves by plundering a ship carrying silk; that, they said, "would degrade them to mere pedlars"; they wanted only gold and silver. See Kerr, *op. cit.*, 10:232.

as a sailor in Cavite, and boasting, like any old sea-dog, of his circumnavigation of the globe, forced though it was, which began on that evening in Manila Bay, precisely at “las seis de la tarde del día martes cuatro de marzo de mil seiscientos y ochenta y siete.”

APPENDIX

The Ship of Sulaiman is a recently translated account of a Persian embassy to Siam in the 1680s. It was written by ibn Muhammad Ibrahim, the secretary of the envoy. Among other things of note is the writer's reactions to the English he met in India. Accounts of the English abroad, through Asian eyes, are comparatively rare, so that this description is of interest. By the same token, the author's account of the “Island of Manila” may be worth repeating. Since he had not been to the Philippines, ibn Muhammad Ibrahim is here reporting what he has heard from sailors and other travellers whom he met in Siam. His brief account runs as follows:

The island of Manila (sic)

Another island is called Manila. From Shahr Nav [Siam] to that port takes twenty days if the winds are favorable. Manila is now in the possession of the king of the Castillians and to reach his capital from that island is a journey of six months. Every few years the king changes the governor whom he has appointed. The usual practice among the Frank [Christian] kings is to leave an officer in his post for three or four years and then when the term is up to see if the man has rendered service worthy of the throne.

If the official's behavior has been exemplary he is promoted to a higher post. Otherwise, if it is clear he was negligent in his duties, he is removed from office. This practice encourages officials to strive in the king's service and also stands as a constant warning to the wayward. Although the above-mentioned king does not derive much profit from this island, he finds it strategically valuable because it is six months' distance from his home kingdom.

Manila has an extremely temperate climate and is exceptionally beautiful. It also possesses many fine houses. By now Franks and men of other nations have built several thousand homes there. Every kind of product is found on the island especially sugar and

white wax. The natives are always cheerful and are all rich. They are continually engaged in giving parties and enjoying themselves.

It may be added that there is a certain amount of gold to be found in the local mines. Manila is actually not very far from China and Japan, thus every year ships from all over the world visit the island for trade and take away good profits. Recently, however, the king decreed that merchants may not stay in the port longer than the monsoon season.

A high level of gold work is practised on the island and this craft is mostly in the hands of the Chinese who have settled there. Their crafts and manufactured goods, especially their work in gold and intricate lattice patterns, are so masterful they have inspired the verses:

Whatever bright objects man can create,
Beating or pouring silver and gold,
Their hands can fashion as no man can fashion
Indeed they are masters of silver and gold.

In the arena of gold work and jewelry they have displayed such feats of skill that they have no rivals in the world market of Time and Place. Their jewelry is so fine and delicate it is a well-cut refutation of all the theories in favor of the indivisible atom. . .

In Manila, as well as all along the coast from Siam to China, there live various wild birds, creatures of extraordinary color that are decorated with beautiful patterns. More strange than their bright colors is the fact that God's power has allowed them to acquire human speech after a certain amount of contact with men. It is a regular business to export these birds, especially to the kingdom of the Macassars who have recently lost a certain number of their ports to the Dutch Franks.

The island of Manila also produces nutmeg and cloves. The wild birds spend their time in those spice trees, particularly when the trees are in bloom and the blossoms are wide open. At that time the birds over-indulge and eat so much that they faint. Then the hunters easily catch them and sell them. But these birds are very delicate and have such little strength, few of them remain alive in captivity. In all the surrounding islands as well there are birds that are very strange looking and have beautiful colors.